

Performance Measurement ...Matters

http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/gov/dmb/perf_measure.htm

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BENCHMARKING – GETTING STARTED

Part of determining if an organization is high performance lies in how well it compares to others performing similar services. You might think that your program is doing very well until you find out that some other organization can provide the service faster and/or cheaper and more importantly, they may also be getting better results. Rather than fearing this information, we should be actively seeking it. By learning the level of performance of peers, we can determine who the high performers are and learn from them. When Xerox wanted to improve its distribution system, it went to LL Bean to learn from that leader in mail order operations. Fairfax County can learn similarly from its peers in government, as well as the private sector when appropriate.

The spring 2004 issue of this newsletter contained an article on how Fairfax County benchmarks for better performance. Some of the County's current benchmarking efforts were described such as the comparative data we obtain through the International City/County Management Association's (ICMA) Center for Performance Measurement. While that article was a brief overview of benchmarking in Fairfax County, this one will discuss how to get started.

To review, *benchmarking is the systematic comparison of performance with other organizations in order to identify best practices that are appropriate to adapt in order to achieve more efficient and/or effective performance.* When we see that another city or county is doing something better than us, we ask "why?" What is it that they are doing differently that enables them to achieve a higher level of performance? What can we learn that will lead to improved performance in Fairfax County? Sometimes there is simply a demographic difference such as having a less transient population that allows another jurisdiction to achieve a higher immunization rate for

two-year-olds. Sometimes it is the difference in weather that may result in lower snow removal costs. However, if you adjust for differences or do not find significant variation, you need to look into the processes that are producing the higher level of performance.

But how do you know which jurisdictions to look at in the first place? Some would like to think that there is one standard list of jurisdictions with whom Fairfax County always benchmarks its performance. In reality, there is no one standard list. There are however, some sources we can use to identify potential benchmarking partners to obtain comparative data. If you want to find a county of similar size (land area, population density, income level, etc.), you can find this type of information on the National Association of Counties' website: <http://www.naco.org/Content/NavigationMenu/AboutCounties/DataandDemographics/DataandDemographics.htm>

The U.S. Bureau of the Census provides similar data. Its website is <http://www.census.gov/>. Sometimes population size is the most important factor, but you may also need to know how diverse that population is or its density. Even when you narrow down the list of potential benchmarking partners according to demographics, you will still need to determine if they offer the same services. While in Virginia, cities are separate from counties, in other states, they are generally part of surrounding counties and each separately may not offer the full array of services that Fairfax County does.

Or you may be looking for a known high performer. When County staff were seeking to improve the capital improvement planning process, they looked at jurisdictions that received a high grade on the Government Performance Project (GPP) capital management survey. For information on the county grading effort, go to <http://>

*"I like
dreams of
the future
better than
the history
of the
past."*



- Thomas Jefferson

www.governing.com/gpp/2002/gp2intro.htm and for information on the city grading effort, go to <http://www.governing.com/gpp/2000/gp0intro.htm>. As a result of earning an overall grade of A- (one of only two counties to achieve the highest grade given), Fairfax County receives many telephone calls and e-mails from others seeking to learn our processes.

Professional organizations and journals are another good source for benchmarking information. Don't overlook them. Other times, a federal or state agency may be collecting data that you can use to see how well Fairfax County compares. Examples of this include FBI crime data, as well as the Commonwealth of Virginia's vital statistics for health-related data. With the Internet, we have more information at our disposal than any other time in history. The challenge is to plow through the mass of data available.

If you are just getting started and have questions about where to begin with benchmarking, feel free to contact the County's PM Coordinator, Barbara Emerson or any of the other PM Team members listed below.

COUNTY EXEC TO SPEAK AT NOVEMBER PM BROWNBAG

Strategic Planning will be the topic of the next Performance Measurement Brownbag Lunch on **November 10, 2004 from noon to 1 p.m. in Room 232 of the Government Center**. County Executive Tony Griffin will be the special guest for this session. He will address the County's strategic planning effort to date as well as the future direction. Come bring your lunch and questions to learn more about this important topic.

Performance Measurement Matters is published quarterly by the PM Team. Editors: Barbara Emerson and Bill Yake; Technical Support: Lynda Pham, Department of Management and Budget.

FAIRFAX COUNTY RECOGNIZED FOR PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

The summer issue of this *Performance Matters* newsletter contained an article about the Performance Management award that Fairfax County received from the Performance Institute in San Diego, California. Since then, the County has earned additional accolades. During September 2004, Fairfax County was notified by ICMA that we had qualified for the higher of that organization's two levels of performance measurement awards -- the Certificate of Distinction. This award was presented October 17, 2004 at ICMA's annual conference in San Diego and recognizes the County's efforts to incorporate performance data into decision-making, enhance the program through training and process improvement, and share our successes through networking with others.

September was a banner month because the Department of Management and Budget was also notified that not only had the County earned the Distinguished Budget Presentation Award for the 19th consecutive year, its budget had also garnered special recognition as an operations guide and for performance measurement. This recognition is especially noteworthy because in 2003, of the 1,104 budgets submitted for review, a mere 5 were singled out as outstanding operations guide, while only 12 were identified for special performance measurement recognition.

"The stakes...are too high for government to be a spectator sport"

- Barbara Jordan

The following is a listing of the current PM Team. Feel free to contact any member if you have questions or comments about performance measurement.

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